

THE 7 DEADLY SINS OF PSYOP

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Author's Note: *The following is an adaptation of Dante's epic poem "The Divine Comedy" as applied to the art of influence and pitfalls to avoid in tactical application. The Seven Deadly Sins are a direct correlation to the ones listed by Dante, but defined as observed during a combat rotation in Iraq. All comments are the personal observation of the author and do not reflect official policy, doctrine or Psychological Operations (PSYOP) endorsement.*

The purpose of this article is to address a common thread observed during counterinsurgency (COIN) operations while deployed in Iraq. Unfortunately, the term Psychological Operations has a negative connotation within the tactical Army and is often misunderstood by the common Soldier on the ground. Comments are often fraught with snide remarks such as, "You guys mess with people's minds." The term "litterbugs" proliferates in the vocabulary of commanders and Soldiers alike. While often unintended, these remarks have a detrimental effect on PSYOP Soldiers who must demonstrate their worth to brigade combat teams and their respective staffs.

The biggest challenge to effective PSYOP is that there is a constant rift between Information Operations (IO) and PSYOP commanders; as a result "IO Products" are often mistaken for PSYOP efforts. The sins listed below are common issues that lead to the breakdown between all levels in the influence business. As a guideline for success, awareness of these pitfalls highlighted in this article can serve as a template for excellence in the conduct of influence operations.

LUST – While defined with regards to sexual desire and thoughts of an impulsive nature, lust can also be applied to PSYOP products. Both PSYOP leaders and maneuver commanders can become obsessive over the product layout, colors, and message while disregarding how it may be interpreted by the receiving audience.

These obsessive compulsions lead to a breakdown in the approval process, which has the secondary effect of delaying the process and rendering the message ineffective due to timeliness. Additionally, it breaks down confidence of those in both the supported unit and those in the PSYOP force, who begin to speculate that the approval chain does not trust the "experts" in military marketing and trained agents of influence.

Arguing over colors, the English message, and the layout becomes a moot point in counterinsurgency operations, where timeliness and message content matters most. While the insurgent propaganda machine marches on, the ability to mass information capabilities and influencing specific products is lost during the development and production of PSYOP messages.

Both PSYOP and maneuver commanders at several levels have an idea or "concept" of what the product should look like in order to convey a message. However, our collective inability to share our

vision to achieve an effect hampers our ability to respond in a timely fashion to an exploitable event prior to insurgent capitalization.

The axiom, "He who gets the message out first, wins" is tantamount in counterinsurgency operations. The truth must always be nested within the message, but once the truth is established, the message can be sent. This enables commanders and PSYOP forces to exploit Dr. David Kilcullen's principle of "exploit a single narrative."

Insurgents stage spectacular events for the sake of information exploitation, and they have a multifaceted, multimedia approach to exploitation. American masters of information relegate themselves to how the product looks well before release in order to appease multiple people prior to even considering the target audience.

GLUTTONY – While gluttony is often associated with overeating to the point of wanton waste, it can be applied very much to the dissemination of PSYOP product and messages. PSYOP forces like to appease maneuver commanders, and therefore, like to provide quantifiable measures of performance by disseminating vast quantities of product. This in itself is gluttonous of an asset that is already in high demand. During the years of operations in Iraq, untold amounts of paper product have been disseminated with minimal measures of effectiveness or analysis completed. Leaflet drops, while sexy and attractive to all forces available, should have a targeted, effects-based approach to achieve or complement an effect.

Without the judicious and multi-faceted approach to the application of influence operations, PSYOP forces cannot honestly measure effectiveness. A cursory study of human emotion reveals that people respond to different aspects of stimuli, and therefore, different forms of media need to be utilized to evoke emotion and change of heart and mind. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, we have vicariously disseminated much product without evaluating the outcome of the product or studying the anticipated effect.

GREED – Greed, the desire to accumulate wealth without the desire to share, is a terrible problem across all aspects of humanity, but has resounding impacts with regards to PSYOP. Synchronization of effort is a difficult task to master in lethal operations and maneuver warfare. True masters of the art of warfare and the science of battle have been students for years and perfected their approach and visualization of the battlefield. PSYOP and information operations need to be synchronized, and must conduct adjacent unit coordination in order to measure that the desired effects and messages are resonating within the target audience outside of unit boundaries.

The lack of information sharing can also lead to "stove piping," which is a common issue across the Army. By guarding information and not properly sharing across all elements of the brigade staff, actions cannot be taken and maneuver commanders are not fully informed on the psychological impact and patterns within their operational environment. Soldiers are hesitant to "give up the gold,"

out of fear of stealing the good ideas. This behavior and thinking is not isolated in PSYOP; it permeates the Army throughout. A change in culture and in thinking can result in astronomical effects — the coordinated effort to achieve a specific effect in the lethal and non-lethal operational environment.

SLOTH – While this term emanates and conjures images of a slow and belching animal of South America, the definition implies laziness. The realm of influence operations permeates with “too little, too late” due to the nature of approval, staffing, and production.

Additionally, when met with hesitance and lack of understanding on the means of employment, PSYOP forces can easily retreat to their shadows and avoid exposure, which can be misconstrued as not being effective in operations. While this is a deadly sin that can be easily associated with PSYOP forces, it is usually a result of a conglomeration of other “sins” that have facilitated the growth of sloth.

If commanders recognize this challenge, and facilitate production and approval, PSYOP efforts could rapidly exploit events in conjunction with the commander’s intent.

WRATH – Anger, fury, and disgust categorize this noun, and it is demonstrated daily across the operational environment by all elements of influence operations. “Where is my product?”, “What is taking so long?”, “Why does it not say what I want it to say?”, and “Do you know the target audience like I know the target audience?” While Soldiers and leaders, especially PSYOP professionals, understand that timeliness is tantamount in COIN operations, this wrath is in fact *counterproductive* to PSYOP efforts.

More often than not, PSYOP elements are suspect to playing to the wrong target audience, and develop products out of frustration to appease the target audience of our supported maneuver commanders. As advisors to maneuver commanders, PSYOP professionals must enforce that behavior change is consistent with time, and that it can take days, weeks, sometimes even months to fully develop, recognize, and implement a significant change in behaviors. As emotional experts, wrath collectively destroys a participatory effort in



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A PSYOP Soldier places a poster identifying possible IED makers in Mosul, Iraq.

synchronizing a deliberate attempt at changing behavior.

ENVY – Of all the deadly sins, envy is the greatest threat of all PSYOP elements. As the battlefield application of influence and the use of information as a weapon is so difficult to master, PSYOP elements must guard themselves from defaulting to door-kicking and assisting civil-military operations. These tasks are not easy by any standard — but they are sexy. They are attractive to all members of the armed services because they yield immediate results.

Lastly, in the category of envy, the decentralized nature and manner of employment of the tactical PSYOP company (TPC) could foster an unintended environment of envy. Once a TPC is task organized, the company commander is not going to see (and may not hear from) his subordinate units for some time. This may have the inadvertent effect of “pitting” one detachment or element against each other, fostering a sense of envy.

Separating PSYOP forces from themselves is necessary, yet it can be detrimental when PSYOP Soldiers do not share ideas or suggestions. Advances in communication devices and the proliferation of internet assets facilitate cross talk and communication, which in theory would encourage information and idea sharing.

Some maneuvers commanders understand the full employment of IO, and as a result, PSYOP elements enjoy planning, implementing, and executing full spectrum PSYOP. Maneuver commanders who

understand the benefits of influence operations tend to have more creative thinking and the free-flowing ideas outside of the norm.

PRIDE – Every Soldier suffers from pride; everyone is the best in their own mind. Pride has a tendency to get the best of PSYOP forces in the manner of “I can’t do that, because of...” Instead of looking at a target set, and choosing a better method of weaponeering the target, the PSYOP Soldier could lose instantaneous credibility with the supported command.

Supported commanders do not assist in the manner, as they already have an idea of what munitions provided by the PSYOP element should be. “I want a handbill saying this...” often echoes within the tactical operations center. This often putting the young officer or sergeant on the spot, and external pressures from various staff elements nearly forces the PSYOP Soldier into conformity.

PSYOP elements can defend against this by saying small phrases such as, “Let me look at this; we might be able to get a quicker turn around if we do this...”, or “Yes Sir, I can do that, but my best weapon is my loudspeakers with a recorded message of you saying...”

Creative weaponeering of a target set by PSYOP elements, in conjunction with the brigade staff allow commanders to benefit from a non-lethal asset that can provide deliverables. Pride is difficult to swallow, and PSYOP Soldiers have to be cunning and quick to answer the commander’s intent and support his unit.

In closing, the proper use of PSYOP forces plays a definitive role in shaping positive outcomes during COIN operations. T.E. Lawrence wrote, “The printing press is the greatest weapon in the armory of the modern guerilla commander.” Being aware of these potential pitfalls arms both the PSYOP elements and the supported brigade staff, which must work in concert to successfully accomplish their missions.

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